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Alan Bilton, Silent Film Comedy and American Culture.

Melenia Arouh

1 Alan Bilton's recent book *Silent Film Comedy and American Culture* examines how film comedy emerged at a time of social and moral transition in the United States, and established itself both as escapist entertainment but also as an expression of the American collective unconscious. Bilton analyses the work of several important comedians of the silent era, relating their biographies and work to the American culture of the period. In this way he weaves a narrative of the times, the myths, the norms, and symbols of the American psyche. His tone of inquiry is engaging and the way he synthesises historical facts, film techniques, industry practices, and theoretical concepts allows him to survey an era that would come to define Hollywood, and our perceptions of comedic films.

2 It is interesting to note that Bilton introduces his inquiry by way of Edward Bernays, the father of public relations. For Bernays, the masses, following the psychoanalytic school of thought he revered, are irrational and barbaric. Social and democratic structures cannot restrain the primeval sexual and violent instincts of the masses. So a distraction is needed that will mollify the crowds and offer them a kind of escape from reality. For Bernays cinema is a perfect distraction since it can serve as a shop window for mass-produced goods, for personal identities, for collective dreams. In psychoanalytic terms, film images hold the ability to affect our emotions, bypass our conscious thought, and allow us to escape to a realm of illusion that best distracts our ferocious instincts. This discussion of Bernays' claims gives us a glimpse of the cultural paradigm in which silent film comedies emerge, and the social role they are thought to perform.

3 What Bilton primarily keeps from this paradigm, and what drives his discussion, is psychoanalytic (film) theory and the idea that cinema connects somehow to our unconscious states of self. Psychoanalysis informs Bilton's inquiry and it does so unapologetically. There is no discussion of the fallacies in the arguments of psychoanalysis or the clinical data that for many refute the theory. In a sense, Bilton's work exists in a vacuum of criticism. He chooses the arguments that can best support his observations and thus conducts his analysis. Interestingly, the avoidance of methodological and/or epistemological questions gives him space to focus on the ways in which the audiences of the time engaged with comedies and comedians, and what these suggest for American culture (in relation to technology, consumerism, and the war). To his great credit, Bilton's thinking remains clear throughout, despite the ambiguities of the theoretical framework.

4 In the first part of the book Bilton examines the work of Mack Sennett, the innovator of slapstick film comedy, and observes that the violence that accompanies this brand of slapstick if often surrealist in kind. Sennett's films seem like a Freudian anxiety dream: a lion in the kitchen, a gorilla in the closet, a car crashing in a house. The world becomes an asylum of violence with no safe ground. For Bilton the comedy springs from the lack of consequences: there are no casualties from this violence –as opposed to the grim reality of World War I.

5 Bilton suggests that this surrealism is informed by an infantile mood: of wanting to inflict pain without fear of punishment or consequence. The same applies to the promiscuous behaviour of The Tramp. In slapstick, all restraints of civilized behaviour are gone. It is no wonder, then, that these films are often considered a critique of bourgeois ideals. For Bilton, however, the Sennett films are not so much a Dadaist attack on the bourgeoisie but an expression of the immigrant experience. At the turn of the 20th century almost 35 million people arrive in America in search of a better tomorrow: uprooted and facing endless (and often absurd) problems, for them the Sennett films become a form of escape and comfort. With the Nickelodeons of the time placed in immigrant neighbourhoods, these films would serve communal roles and they would educate the audience in 'America,' strengthening social cohesion.

6 Bilton's line of inquiry regarding the immigrant experience leads him straight to the work of Charlie Chaplin, perhaps the most famous comedian of this era and an immigrant himself. What Bilton finds most interesting in Chaplin's performance is how it is often mechanized and automated, like that of a marionette or puppet. Bilton relies here on Freud's conception of puppets. Freud argues that toys help children ease the transition from the sense of self and world they have in the womb to the sense of self and world they have to face outside it. A toy will become a favourite, an extension of our self, and as a result the child will perceive it as both animate and inanimate. Bilton finds this 'animation of the inanimate' to be a constant in Chaplin's films, from how he engages with (or becomes a part of) machines, to his movements that suggest

automation (by way of ballet). “Chaplin’s films can be seen to rearticulate Freud’s definition of the uncanny: the confusion between the animate and the inanimate, self and other, infantile uncertainty displaced into the mechanized reality of modern life” (109).

7 If Chaplin is the starving immigrant and Harold Lloyd the middle-class, boy next door, the overweight comedian Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle became the symbol of the overindulgence this modern life allows for. Bilton examines Arbuckle’s popularity and notes that although in the late 19th century extra weight was seen as a sign of good health and prosperity, by the early 20th century it was named ugly, unhealthy, and embarrassing: “[t]he body had to be actively remoulded, taking on a new streamlined, efficient shape, in keeping with the sleek modernism of the time” (118). This sudden aversion to fatness is for Bilton the expression of a collective anxiety, of a society moving away from Puritan ideals of self-restraint to consumerism, instant gratification, and convenience culture. The ragged, lean Westerner being replaced by the pampered, effeminate desk clerk.

8 So how did ‘Fatty’ manage to achieve popularity? Arbuckle’s image was that of the fat kid, “who couldn’t help it, whose appetites are greater than his restraint, but whose innocence disarms any thought of punishment or responsibility” (126). He becomes popular then, because we can forgive *him* of his indulgence and, according to Freud, he is not really a male proper since his fatness renders him impotent and consequently unthreatening. It is indeed interesting to consider the role of weight in comedy. Even today, where Hollywood beauty standards remain strict and unforgiving, male comedians are beloved despite their excess weight: John Belushi, Chris Farley, Zack Galifianakis, Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill. It is, of course, more difficult to find female equivalents (Melissa McCarthy comes to mind, but so does the vitriol against Lena Dunham’s body), which supports Bilton’s note that the issue of weight here is very much gendered.

9 Of course ‘Fatty’s’ career would come to an abrupt end after the 1921 scandal that tarnished his reputation. Arbuckle was accused of raping and murdering a young starlet during an orgy. As Bilton observes, the press demonized his body: it was alleged that ‘Fatty’ crushed and killed the starlet with his weight, and because he was impotent he had instead raped her with a coke bottle. Public opinion turned against him. Devotion turned to disgust, followed by mass hysteria about moral decline and Hollywood debauchery. Maybe there is a parallel line running here, between Chaplin’s decline due to his voice and political ideals, and Arbuckle’s decline due to his weight and sexual appetites.

10 It is perhaps unsurprising that only one female star of the time, Mabel Normand, is considered in this book. Comedy is often perceived as a male activity and Hollywood has always favoured male comedians – with the question “Can women be funny?” still being asked with a straight face. As Bilton notes, “[s]lapstick comedy is basically masculine in gender and often anti-feminine in intention” (149). Bilton seems uncertain of who Mabel Normand actually was or what her stardom meant: “[h]er star

image is unfixed, over-determined and contradictory, a constant shuffling of the roles available to her" (151). One characteristic that seems quite evident is that her image was associated with activity and the "new woman": running, cycling, swimming, firing arms. Her presence is active and physical, not docile and passive. And maybe the comedy springs from this perceived gender transgression.

11 With traditional morality in decline and social norms in transition, what the past stands for and how the present came to be become important cultural questions. In this context, Bilton examines the popular comedian Buster Keaton's choice to place the action of many of his films in the South – a prominent symbol of a bygone era. According to Bilton, Keaton's choice is primarily autobiographical. Keaton's family had a travelling medicine show, where Keaton, still a child, would participate in violent and often abusive stunts. The family had to flee to the Deep South to escape the attention of child protection services. There, his father's alcoholism grew, and as it grew the show became even more dangerous with impressive and demanding stunts that would often go wrong. Keaton's escape from this childhood would lead him straight to the movies and subsequent fortune. According to Bilton in films like *Our Hospitality* (1923), *The General* (1928), and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) the South becomes a place of personal crisis for Keaton, the context in which issues of patriarchy and patrimony can be addressed - overcoming the past to allow a new era to emerge.

12 Remarkably for a book about comedy Bilton ends his inquiry with an examination of silent war films and the Freudian notion of trauma and neurosis. He relates this discussion with slapstick comedy and the element of regression to an infantile state, devoid of adult responsibility. The central figure in this analysis is Harry Langdon, a comedian that looked like a child trapped in the body of a man. The war films he stars in are slow-paced and he often seems lost in a kind of limbo, a catatonic state, like he wants to retreat to a foetal position. But for Bilton it is not just a regression to an infantile state but also a retreat to an even more immobile state of "autistic disengagement." "The comic tension of Langdon's work derives from the fact that we, the audience, know that there will be terrible consequences if Harry doesn't act now, and yet at the same time we know he never will" (212). His immobility is explained in Freudian terms. The repetition-compulsion that defines neuroses for Freud is an expression of the death drive since there is an unconscious longing to return to an earlier state of being, of inorganic matter, free of stimuli; namely the state of death. Harry Langdon's performance is representative then of this death drive. Thus, Bilton presents to the reader a psychoanalytic reading of (comedic) war films of that period, bridging the anxieties of the time with American culture and the ways in which cinema affects (and expresses) our unconscious.

13 In reading this book one is reminded of Preston Sturges' classic film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Towards the end of the film the main protagonist, a disillusioned and imprisoned Hollywood director, finds

himself in a rural church, awaiting the screening of a movie. The lights dim, the projector flares up, and the organ player starts the music. The film is an early Mickey and Pluto cartoon, with standard slapstick routines. To the surprise and amazement of the protagonist, the audience forgets their impoverished and dreary reality and laughs loudly and joyfully. Hollywood entertainment, he concludes, can and should offer the audience an escape from reality. This is perhaps the *raison d'être* of silent film comedies and the reason why they remain much loved. As Bilton establishes, silent film comedy emerged at a time of social transition and cultural discomfort. As such it did serve a variety of roles: an escape from the harsh reality of the time, a force of social cohesion, a space of wish-fulfilment, and a space where social anxieties would be addressed (for psychoanalysis the tension would be released) in a seemingly constructive and entertaining manner.

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